Remarks on Signing a Proclamation Honoring the 19th Anniversary of the Americans With Disabilities Act

July 24, 2009

The President. Thank you. Please, everybody be seated. Thank you. First of all, how about my Secretary of State? Give it up for Senator Hillary Clinton. She is doing an unbelievable job. She's traveling all around the world delivering a message that America is back and ready to lead. And everywhere she goes she is representing us with grace and strength, and we are very fortunate to have her.

I'm also lucky to have an outstanding Attorney General in Eric Holder, so I wanted to make sure that we thank him for being here; my Secretary of Labor, who's committed to these issues, Hilda Solis. We've got a couple of Governors in the house—at least I see one of them over here, Governor David Paterson of New York. And I think that Christine Gregoire was here. There she is, right here—from Washington State.

I want to thank the outstanding Members of Congress who are on the stage: Senator Dan Inouye, Representative Steny Hoyer, Representative Robert Andrews, Representative James Sensenbrenner, Representative Jim Langevin, thank you so much. Please give them a big round of applause.

And not on the stage, but extraordinarily important, are three key figures who helped to get the original ADA passed. I want to acknowledge them. First of all, not able to attend, but this guy is a fierce warrior on behalf of the disabilities community, Tom Harkin. He couldn't be here, but give him a round of applause. Another person who could not be here but was instrumental in guiding the passage of this landmark legislation, Bob Dole, but his wonderful partner, Elizabeth Dole—Senator Elizabeth Dole—is here, so please give her a round of applause on behalf of Bob Dole. And Attorney General and somebody who worked very hard on this issue, Richard Thornburgh; please give him a big round of applause. Where's Richard? There he is.

Well, welcome to the White House. We are thrilled to have you all here for a historic announcement regarding our global commitment to fundamental human rights for persons with disabilities. I'm also honored to mark the anniversary of a historic piece of civil rights legislation with so many of the people who helped make it possible, and I'd like to reflect on that for a few moments.

I'm reminded today of my father-in-law—some of you have heard his story—Fraser Robinson. He was Michelle's hero. When you talk to her about her dad, even today she just lights up. He was a vibrant and athletic man who provided for his family as a shift worker at a water treatment plant in Chicago. And in his early thirties, he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. And even as it progressed, even as he struggled to get dressed in the morning and used two canes to get himself to work every day, despite the fact that he had to wake up a little bit earlier and work a little harder to overcome the barriers he faced every day, he never complained. He never asked for special treatment. He just wanted to be given the opportunity to do right by his family. Never missed a day of work; would have trouble buttoning his own shirts, but he would make sure that he woke up in time to do it.

And by the time I met him, he would struggle with those two canes, but even if he had to go over a bumpy patch of grass to watch his son's ball games or go up a flight of stairs so that he could see his daughter dance, he would do it. This was before the ADA passed. And I think about him all the time when I think about these issues.

It's a reminder of the very promise of the ADA. Nineteen years ago this weekend, Democrats and Republicans, advocates and ordinary Americans, came together here at the White House to watch President George H.W. Bush sign the ADA into law. Folks traveled from all across America to witness a milestone in the long march to achieve equal opportunity for all.

But like all great movements, this one did not begin or end in Washington, DC. It began in small towns and big cities across this country. It began with people like Fraser Robinson showing that they can be full contributors to society regardless of the lack of awareness of others. It began when people refused to accept a second-class status in America. It began when they not only refused to accept the way the world saw them, but also the way they had seen themselves.

And when quiet acts of persistence and perseverance were coupled with vocal acts of advocacy, a movement grew, and people marched and organized and testified. And parents of children with disabilities asked why their children, who had the same hopes and dreams as children everywhere else, were left out and left behind. And wounded veterans came home from war only to find that, despite their sacrifice for America, they now felt excluded from America's promise.

We had a little meeting before we came out, and Tony Coelho, who was instrumental on this issue, spoke in just incredibly moving terms about what it meant for him to be an epileptic and the fact that discrimination was rife. He was rejected from the priesthood because that was considered unacceptable. He was rejected from the Army because that was considered unacceptable.

Those experiences could have just been internalized and people could have felt doubt, but instead, it became a source of strength. And step by step, progress was won, laws were changed. Americans with disabilities were finally guaranteed the right to vote, a right that only carries real meaning when you can enter the voting booth to cast that vote. Folks were extended certain protections from discrimination and given the needed rehabilitation and training to go to the job. And even though we still have a long way to go with regard to education, children with disabilities were no longer excluded, no longer kept separate, and then no longer denied the opportunity to learn the same skills in the same classroom as other children.

Now, even two decades ago, too many barriers still stood, too many Americans suffered under segregation and discrimination. Americans with disabilities were still measured by what folks thought they couldn't do, not by what they can. Employers often assumed disabled meant unable. Millions of Americans with disabilities were eager to work, but couldn't find a job. An employer could have told a person with a disability, "No, we don't hire your kind." That person then could have tried to find recourse at the courthouse, only to find that she couldn't enter the building and wouldn't find a receptive audience even if she did.

What was needed was a bill of rights for persons with disabilities, and that's what the ADA was. It was a formal acknowledgment that Americans with disabilities are Americans first, and they are entitled to the same rights and freedoms as everybody else: a right to belong and

participate fully in the American experience, a right to dignity and respect in the workplace and beyond, the freedom to make of our lives what we will.

In a time when so many doubted that people with disabilities could participate in our society, contribute to our economy, or support their families, the ADA assumed they could. Americans with disabilities didn't ask for charity or demand special treatment; they only wanted a fair shot at opportunity. They didn't want to be isolated, they wanted to be integrated; not dependent, but independent. And allowing all Americans to engage in our society and our economy is in our national interest, especially now, when we all have a part to play to build a new foundation for America's lasting prosperity.

So the ADA showed the world our full commitment to the rights of people with disabilities, and now we have an opportunity to live up to that commitment. Today, 650 million people—10 percent of the world's population—live with a disability. In developing countries, 90 percent of children with disabilities don't attend school. Women and girls with disabilities are too often subject to deep discrimination.

Disability rights aren't just civil rights to be enforced here at home; they're universal rights to be recognized and promoted around the world. And that's why I'm proud to announce that next week the United States of America will join 140 other nations in signing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It's the first new human rights convention of the 21st century.

This extraordinary treaty calls on all nations to guarantee rights like those afforded under the ADA. It urges equal protection and equal benefits before the law for all citizens, reaffirms the inherent dignity and worth and independence of all persons with disabilities worldwide. I've instructed Ambassador Susan Rice to formally sign the Convention at the United Nations in New York next week, and I hope that the Senate can give swift consideration and approval to the Convention once I submit it for their advice and consent.

And even as we extend our commitment to persons for—with disabilities around the world, we're working to deepen that commitment here at home. We've lifted the ban on stem cell research. We've reauthorized the Children's Health Insurance Program, continuing coverage for 7 million children and covering an additional 4 million children in need, including children with disabilities. I was proud to sign the landmark Christopher and Dana Reeve Paralysis Act, the first piece of comprehensive legislation specifically aimed at addressing the challenges that are faced by Americans living with paralysis.

We've nearly doubled funding for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. We're strengthening antidiscrimination enforcement at the Justice Department. We're creating a new special assistant position at the Department of Transportation just to focus on accessible transportation. We've launched the "Year of Community Living" to affirm the fundamental right of people with disabilities to live with dignity and respect wherever they choose.

So I'm proud of the progress we've made. But I'm not satisfied, and I know you aren't either. Until every American with a disability can learn in their local public school in the manner best for them, until they can apply for a job without fear of discrimination, and live and work independently in their communities if that's what they choose, we've got more work to do. As long as we as a people still too easily succumb to casual discrimination or fear of the unfamiliar, we've still got more work to do.

As we continue that work, we should remember just who it was that the ADA was all about. It was about the young girl with cerebral palsy who just wanted to see a movie at her

local theater, but was turned away. It was about the Vietnam veteran who returned home paralyzed and said he felt like he'd fought for everyone but himself. It was about the thousands of people with disabilities who showed up at public hearings all across the country to share their stories of exclusion and injustice, and the millions more they spoke up for.

Because they did, we live in a country where our children can grow up with every opportunity to learn and compete, where our disabled veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan can navigate public places more easily, and where 54 million Americans with disabilities can pursue their full measure of happiness. And what we've learned—what we've—what they have taught us is that it is far more noble and worthwhile and valuable to make it possible for these Americans to live up to their full potential. Because when we do, it makes all of us more whole, it makes our Union more perfect, it makes the United States of America strong.

Every morning, I walk along the Colonnade that connects this house to the Oval Office. And there's something you might not notice unless you're really paying attention—and I'll be honest, when I take that walk, I usually have a lot on my mind—[*laughter*]—but there's a gentle slope at the end of that Colonnade, a ramp that was installed during a renovation of the West Wing 75 years ago, making it much easier for one of my predecessors to get to work.

Back then, fear and prejudice towards Americans with disabilities was the norm, but most Americans didn't even know that President Roosevelt had a disability. That means that what most Americans also didn't know was that President Roosevelt's disability made absolutely no difference to his ability to renew our confidence or rescue our economy and mobilize our greatest generation to save our way of life.

Let me correct that—I actually think it did make a difference in a positive way. What he told us was that "further progress must, of necessity, depend on a deeper understanding on the part of every man and woman in the United States." I believe we're getting there. And today, because more than one in five Americans live with a disability, and chances are, the rest of us love somebody with one, we remember our obligation to ensuring their every chance to pursue the American Dream. We celebrate the courage and commitment of those who brought us to this point. And we recommit ourselves to building a world free of unnecessary barriers and full of that deeper understanding.

So thank you all, for being here. Let's sign this bill.

[*At this point, the President signed the proclamation.*]

The President. There you go. Thank you, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:58 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa; former Senator Bob Dole; former Attorney General Richard L. Thornburgh; former Representative Anthony Coelho of California; and Ambassador Susan E. Rice, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Americans With Disabilities Act, anniversary, proclamation signing.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Andrews, Robert E.; Bush, George H.W.; Clinton, Hillary Rodham; Coelho, Anthony; Dole, Elizabeth; Dole, Robert J.; Gregoire, Christine; Harkin, Thomas R.; Holder, Eric H., Jr.;

Hoyer, Steny H.; Inouye, Daniel K.; Langevin, James R.; Obama, Michelle; Paterson, David A.; Rice, Susan E.; Robinson, Craig; Sensenbrenner, F. James, Jr.; Solis, Hilda L.; Thornburgh, Richard L.

Subjects: Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Casualties; Americans With Disabilities Act, anniversary; Civil rights : Disabled persons, antidiscrimination efforts; Developing countries : Disabled persons, discrimination against; Diseases : Epilepsy ; Diseases : Multiple sclerosis; Health and Human Services, Department of : State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP); Iraq : U.S. military forces :: Casualties; Justice, Department of : Attorney General; Labor, Department of : Secretary; Legislation, enacted : Christopher and Dana Reeve Paralysis Act; New York : Governor; State, Department of : Secretary; United Nations : Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; Washington : Governor.

DCPD Number: DCPD200900597.